Some Reflections on Ethics

Lieutenant General SRR Aiyengar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)@

Introduction

The word 'ethics' originated from the Latin word 'ethicus' and the Greek word 'ethicos' which means character or manners. The horizon of this definition may further be expanded and the concepts of right or wrong behaviour or conduct are incorporated. As ethics acts as a guide of action, it can be also termed as a normative discipline. We are social creatures. More often than we realise, we get our cues for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour from our environment as well as our intrinsic traits of character. This is even truer in the intense social environment of a military organisation or institution. Various ethical theories provide a system of rules or principles that guide us in making decisions about what is right or wrong and good or bad in a particular situation. It provides a basis for understanding what it means to be a morally decent human being. Stated another way, ethical theories when applied to leadership are about both, the actions of leaders and who they are as people. The choices leaders make and how they respond in a given circumstance are informed and directed by their ethics.

Military Ethics –What does it Mean?

Our way of life and our well-being in the armed forces depend upon the ability of leaders at all levels to inspire and lead often under the most harrowing conditions and unimaginable levels of stress. How do we go about these duties is an important question that props us. The Military Ethos or its Ethics has an important role to play here. The military officer is considered a gentleman, not because Nation wills it, nor because it has been the custom of people in all times to afford him that courtesy, but specifically because nothing less than a gentleman is truly suited for his particular set of responsibilities.

Military ethics applies to a specialised realm and has developed principles appropriate to it over time to help guide future practices. Military ethics is a species of the genus 'professional ethics'. That is to say, it exists to be of service to professionals who are not themselves specialists in ethics but who have to carry out the tasks entrusted to the profession as honourably and correctly as possible. It is analogous to medical ethics or legal ethics in the sense that its core function is to assist those professions to think through the moral challenges and dilemmas inherent in their professional activity and, by helping members of the profession better understand the ethical demands upon them, to enable and motivate them to act appropriately in the discharge of their professional obligations.1

Military ethics is at its core practical and professional. It is meant to be the handmaid of the profession of arms. It exists to assist thoughtful professionals to think through their real-world problems and issues. Although there are few conceptual rough edges; overall these principles make good practical sense to experienced military professionals. In the field of military ethics in particular, clean and tidy solutions to problems are sometimes at hand, but often all options have some regrettable aspects.2 It necessitates a deep understanding of the constraints under which the profession carries out its duties. It even requires an understanding of the internal structure and dynamics of the profession. Military ethics have come under greater scrutiny especially during the 'War on Terror and Insurgency'. The question what constitutes a 'just war' and how it may be waged are highlighted in the conflicts involving security forces in Counter Insurgency and Anti-terrorist operations.

The Centrality of Ethics to Leadership

Ethics are a fundamental component of leadership. Our lives are permeated with ethical challenges that help each one of us to learn about oneself and the world around us. Through such experiences we build our character, which is one of the most important elements of leadership. In regard to leadership, ethics has to do with what leaders do and who leaders are. It is concerned with the nature of leaders' behaviour, and with their virtuousness. In any decision making situation, ethical issues are either implicitly or explicitly involved. Other leadership elements, like our value systems, the goals that we set for ourselves and for our organisations, our actions, and our interaction and relationships with others, all lead to changes in our environment and contribute to the legacy we leave behind.

Leaders have a particular responsibility to enforce ethical standards because they hold both the power and the responsibility to exert change. Ethical leadership means first and foremost staying true to oneself and remaining firmly grounded in reality, recognising that we—leaders and subordinates—are all equal in our obligations to respect the same laws and ethical standards. Rank or status immunity does not give us the right to misuse it, and it does not give us absolution from breaking the law. Ethical leadership means to treat others as you would like to be treated yourself; treat everyone with dignity and respect regardless of their ethnic, religious or social background, gender or political beliefs, rank or file. It means giving everyone a chance at learning, expression, development and promotion.

Ethical leadership carries with it an obligation to use power and authority for the common good—to improve the lives of others. It means motivating, leading others to do well, to make a difference for a better world. We have a responsibility well beyond our official functions, as human beings. We have to build professional ethics upon our personal ethics. Fairness, caring, and compassion for others have to lead us in our professional and personal lives. Leaders influence followers and the nature of the influence depends on the leaders' character and behaviour (particularly the nature and outcome of behaviour)

Leaders will fill positions of command. And very much of leadership is about "taking charge" and "getting stuff done". Besides these practical things, leadership demands character. Other words for character are integrity, or conscience. The ideas of conscience and trust illustrate the difference between leadership and command. Leadership is personal; it depends upon people of good character and moral courage, acting in good conscience. Such people inspire trust in those who follow them willingly. Command is positional and with command comes all the power and authority over subordinates that the leader needs to achieve tasks. The nature and scope of command authority varies from appointment to appointment and increases with rank. Leaders have an ethical claim to the authority of command only

by unflagging integrity. Leaders bring strength of character to command positions.

Leadership demands an ethical example. Leadership must be ethically disciplined in order to protect the interests and reputation of the armed forces and its people. The end, no matter how worthy, never justifies unethical means. People who demonstrate leadership, demonstrate society's ideals, and act in accord with the laws and moral codes which separate the unethical application of force from the ethical application of force. All military tasks must be accomplished by ethical means. As General Sir John Hackett once remarked: "What a bad person cannot be, is a good sailor, soldier or airman. Military institutions thus form a repository of moral resource that should always be a source of strength within the State."3

The Trilogy of 'Ethics, Conscience and Leadership'

Ethics also means the continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly-based. Conscience is an engine of moral authenticity or genuineness, enabling professional decisions from the basis of integrity. Conscience is central to the leadership 'ethic of being' which is central to Military ethos. 'Being' is what Shri Debashis Chatterjee in his book "Timeless Leadership" describes it as 'is the raw material for becoming a leader'. Character is defined by conscience, which is the moral sense of right and wrong and central to leadership. Leaders acknowledge other people as moral equals, equally deserving of the respect which promotes trust and confidence. This emphasises those leaders' model professional ideals which demand more than mere technical expertise. Despite all our efforts, the chance of a clash between conscience and duty through ignorance and misjudgment is still very real. The risk is there in peace, it is probably at its height in counter-insurgency, and it smolders in general war. All the while, the soldier's actions are exposed, and his principles questioned by the society as never before.4

Conscience, more robust than the 'competencies' of 'emotional intelligence', is an inner feeling as to the goodness or otherwise of behaviour. Conscience guides behaviour. Conscience is more than an ill-defined self-justified, confidence in the correctness of action or judgment. Conscience draws upon the wider environment in which it operates. In the armed forces, conscience is strengthened by a rational appreciation of our values, conventions, expectations and by the ideals of armed forces professional service. The rational foundation of conscience is important because leaders must be exemplars of the military profession and inspire others to commit to a just cause.

Conscience demands ethical 'mindfulness' or ethical 'awareness'.5 Leaders of conscience will always realise what they are doing, and why they are doing it. They will work hard to be ethically responsive and aware and to build an organisation which becomes collectively mindful. Ethical leadership does not depend upon the quality and substance of (organisational) values, but upon the strength of character which interprets and applies values to achieve what's best and what's right. Acting in good faith is the essence of leadership by example, and fundamental to trust between leaders and followers.

Ethics of Character : Virtues and Values

For Aristotle, virtue is something that is practised and thereby learned—it is a habit. This has clear implications for moral education; for Aristotle, obviously thinks that you can teach people to be virtuous. Virtues are those strengths of character that enable us to flourish. The virtuous person has practical wisdom, the ability to know when and how best to apply these various moral perspectives. Values are what we, as a profession, judge to be right. Individually or organisationally, values determine what is right and what is wrong, and doing what is right or wrong is what we mean by ethics. To behave ethically is to behave in a manner consistent with what is right or moral.

Character is the foundation of a leadership culture. Such a culture recognises that commendable personal example generates trust and commitment, rather than compliance and submission. Character, comprised of a person's moral and ethical qualities, helps determine what is right and gives a leader motivation to do what is appropriate, regardless of the circumstances or consequences. An informed ethical conscience consistent with the armed forces values strengthens leaders to make the right choices when faced with tough issues. Leaders must embody these values and inspire others to do the same.

Character is essential to successful leadership. It determines who people are, how they act, helps determine right from wrong, and choose what is right. Adhering to the principles as embodied in the army, navy and air force values (hereinafter called collectively as military values) is essential to upholding high ethical standards of behaviour. Unethical behaviour quickly destroys organisational morale and cohesion—it undermines the trust and confidence essential to teamwork and mission accomplishment. Consistently doing the right thing forges strong character in individuals and expands to create a culture of trust throughout the organisation. Ethics indicate how a person should behave. Military values represent the beliefs that a person has. For example, the seven army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selflessness, honour, integrity and courage (physical and moral), represent a set of common beliefs that leaders are expected to uphold and reinforce by their actions. The translation from desirable ethics to internal values to actual behaviour involves choices. Discipline, though not specifically stated above as a core value, is a value which is most profound when it finds expression as self-discipline, which is a dignified, responsible and willing commitment to the ethos of professional service articulated in our value system.

Ethical conduct must reflect genuine values and beliefs. Soldiers, sailors and airmen adhere to the military values because they want to live ethically and profess the values because they know what is right. Adopting good values and making ethical choices are essential to produce leaders of character. Leaders seen as abusive or toxic (such as intimidating and insulting subordinates) have higher rates of non-combatant mistreatment and misconduct in their units/establishments. Leaders must consistently focus on shaping ethics-based organisational climates in which subordinates and organisations can achieve their full potential. Leaders who adhere to applicable laws, regulations and unit standards build credibility with their subordinates and enhance trust with the Indian people they serve.

Ethical Dilemmas

A dilemma is a predicament in which the decision-maker must choose between two options of near or equal value. In addition, the dilemmas, which confront modern professionals, may result from options, which are not well defined, or from solutions, which create additional possible or known problems and harm for the problem carrier or for others. We have all experienced, at one time or another, situations in which our professional responsibilities unexpectedly come into conflict with our deepest values. We very often respond to these in a variety of ways: some impulsively “go with the gut feeling”; others talk it over with friends, colleagues, or families; still others think back to what a mentor would do in similar circumstances. In every case, regardless of what path is chosen, these decisions taken cumulatively over many years form the basis of an individual’s character.

An ethical decision typically involves choosing between two options: one we know to be right and another we know to be wrong. A defining moment, however, challenges us in a deeper way by asking us to choose between two or more ideals in which we deeply believe. Such challenges rarely have a ‘correct’ response. Rather, they are situations created by circumstances that ask us to step forward and ‘form, reveal and test ourselves’. We ‘form’ our character in defining moments because we commit to irreversible courses of action that shape our personal and professional identities. We ‘reveal’ something new about us to ourselves and others because such moments uncover something that had been hidden or crystallise something that had been only partially known. And we ‘test’ ourselves because we discover whether we will live up to our personal beliefs/ideals or only pay lip service to them.

Leaders who are most satisfied in resolving such issues are the ones who undertake a process of probing self-enquiry, if possible in quiet seclusion or otherwise they may have to do it on the run as they engage in other managerial tasks. In such introspection, one is able to dig below the busy surface of their daily lives and refocus on their core values and principles. Once recovered, those values and principles renew their sense of purpose at work and act as a springboard for shrewd, pragmatic, politically astute action. By repeating this process throughout our working lives, one is able to craft an authentic and strong identity based on your own, rather than on someone else, understanding of what is right. Not every ethical dilemma has a right solution. Reasonable people often disagree; otherwise there would be no dilemma. However, it is essential that one must agree on a process for dealing with dilemmas.6

Ethical Reasoning versus Rationalisation

To have clear ethical thought is to discern the difference between ‘reasoning’ and ‘rationalisation’. Reasoning is a process of analysis for arriving at informed judgments. It clarifies the distinction between right and wrong action. Rationalisation is a process of constructing a justification for a decision we suspect is really flawed—and often, one that was arrived at through a mental process characterised by contrivance and self-dealing. Rationalisation purposefully blurs right and wrong. We fool ourselves into thinking something is justified when it isn’t. This is a lesson we all have learned, probably to our embarrassment. But in ethical decision making, rationalisation can become more than an isolated error. It can become a habit. With practice, we can ethically desensitise ourselves to the point that we are likely to repeatedly do the wrong thing.7

The tell tale sayings of rationalisations that pop-up daily are: “If you can’t beat them, join them; if I don’t do it, somebody else will, it is all for the good of the organisation, if it does not hurt anyone, what does it matter? Everyone else is doing it”. We can be sure that when we catch such lines on the tips of our tongues, we are twisting ethical reasoning.

Conclusion

The question of ethics is faced in all walks of life. Everywhere it raises hard, often insoluble questions about the choice of the right path. The biggest trouble even to a sincere wish to conform to ethical principles is the persistent cropping of situations where ethical principles themselves may appear to be contradictory and one has to make a difficult choice, guided by one’s conscience. Conscience is probably best described as a fallible moral judgment which, if acknowledged, produces actions and if ignored, merely produces a sense of guilt. An informed ethical conscience consistent with our value systems strengthens leaders to make right choices when faced with tough issues.

A leader is a moral ‘exemplar’, in that he demonstrates ethical behaviour in all his actions both in public and private. He embeds these ethical behaviours in all his decisions and knows, and recognises how these actions affect the common good. Not only is he aware of the core values, he has the courage as well to live these in all parts of his life. Here he moves from the ‘mere intellectual acceptance’ to a ‘heart and soul embodiment’ of these values in every day decisions and actions thus articulating ‘walking the talk’. He will not compromise the good of the whole for the privilege of the select few. What makes the leader the most is certain solidity at the core, a solidity based on principles that are essential points on a moral compass.

Making good ethical decisions requires a trained sensitivity to ethical issues and a practised method for exploring the ethical aspects of a decision and weighing the considerations that should impact our choice of a course of action. Making ethical decisions is easy when the facts are clear and the choices black and white. But it is a different story when the situation is clouded by ambiguity, incomplete information, multiple points of view and conflicting responsibilities. Many cases of misconduct, cheating, misappropriation, bribery, though may appear different but they have a lot in common since they are full of the oldest questions in the world, questions of human behaviour and human judgment applied in ordinary day-to-day situations. Clay T Buckingham puts it more succinctly when he remarks “Standing firm ethically can exact a cost, perhaps a steep one. As professionals we must be willing to pay it.”8

Endnotes

1. Martin L Cook & Henrik Syse (2010): What Should We Mean by ‘Military Ethics’? Journal of Military Ethics, 9:2, 119-122.

2. Bill Rhodes-”An Introduction to Military Ethics-A Reference Handbook”-Chapter 1-‘An Overview of Applied Ethics for the Military’, pp..2-3

3. Sir John Hacket in “The Military in the Service of the State in Malham M Wakin “War, Morality and Military Profession”, pp 124-5.

4. James Glover in “A Soldier and his Conscience” in “Parameters of Military Ethics”, PERGAMON-BRASSEY’S International Defence Publishers.Inc, p 149.

5. The Royal Australian Navy-Leadership Ethics-2010, Chapter 1 – ‘Leaders of Conscience’, pp 17-24.

6. Joseph L Badaracco, Jr in “The Discipline of Building Character”- Harvard Business Review on Leadership, pp 80-113.

7. Ronald A Howard and Clinton D Korver in “Ethics for the Real World” Chapter 2 –‘Draw Distinctions’ pp 43-44.

8. Clay T Buckingham, “Ethics and the Senior Officer: Institutional Tensions”, Autumn Issue 1985 of Parameters.

@Lieutenant General SRR Aiyengar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into the Corps of Signals on 11 Jun 1961 and retired as the Commandant National Defence College, New Delhi in Apr 2011. Prior to that he has been Commandant of the Military College of Telecommunication Engineering and Defence Services Staff College.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIV, No. 596, April-June 2014.